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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 007331

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SUBJECT: THE AMBASSADOR'S INTRODUCTORY CALL ON NEW INTERIOR
MINISTER ARI WONG-ARAYA

Classified By: AMBASSADOR RALPH L. BOYCE. REASON 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Interior Minister Ari Wong-Araya outlined to the Ambassador on December 7 the Surayud government's approach to the conflict in the South, which focuses on building understanding through peaceful means, including the restoration of the old Southern Border Provinces Administration Center. Ari also detailed efforts to reform the police and a new program to educate rural voters on democracy. The Ambassador thanked Ari for his Ministry's cooperation in the recent decision to open a new U.S. resettlement program for Burmese refugees in Mae La camp. Biographic information for Ari is included in paragraph nine.
End Summary.

SOUTHERN THAILAND

¶2. (SBU) During an introductory call on December 7, the Ambassador asked new Interior Minister Ari Wong-Araya, a Muslim and former Ministry of Interior (MOI) careerist, for his perspective on the situation in southern Thailand. Ari, who was hailed by southern leaders as the right choice for Interior Minister, explained that the government's focus is on peaceful methods in handling the conflict. This new approach centers on improving understanding among the people and government officials. According to Ari, the Surayud government is very engaged on this issue, in contrast to the previous government, which didn't even have a strategy.

¶3. (C) The Ambassador explained that many people outside of Thailand ask him about Thailand's "Muslim Problem" in the South, to which he explains that this is not a religious issue, but one rooted in difference between Thai citizens who are ethnically Malay and ethnically Thai. That said, relations between these two groups are fraying in the South. Ari agreed with this point, but added that one cannot look at this as merely a police or security problem. In the recent past, according to Ari, people haven't focused enough on development in the troubled provinces. Ari says that he has told Prime Minister Surayud that the government cannot take cops from Bangkok or the north and drop them into South, a region that they don't understand. This only exacerbates the problems there. According to Ari, the new government understands this and is thus focusing on rebuilding the old Southern Border Provinces Administration Center (SBPAC), which was an effective interagency medium in the eighties and nineties for local citizens to air their grievances and feel involved in governance. (Note: the Thaksin government disbanded the old SBPAC in 2002 and replaced with a more

security-focused coordination body. Many Thaksin critics have pointed to this decision as a contributing factor to the surge in violence since 2004. End Note.) Ari said that he had worked with the old SBPAC and this structure effectively kept the peace. The new government has only been in office for two months, but Ari is confident that the situation will improve.

¶4. (C) In response to the Ambassador's question about the difference between the old and new generation of separatists, Ari explained that the new generation does not appear to have a plan or platform, and is not scared of death. The key to combating them lies in building up local cooperation and support for central government efforts; the local villagers know who is conducting the violence. Ari explained that those who actually support the idea of separating from the Thai state are a very small minority. The majority of southern people have ethnic and other grievances, but still accept and even love the Thai state. Even in the small, private Islamic schools in southern Thailand, the Thai flag still flies. Ari does not believe that external actors are involved in the South. The Ambassador explained that in Aceh, external terrorist groups had offered assistance to local separatists, which were rebuffed. Local separatists were focused on their own, limited cause and were not interested in a broader extremist agenda. Ari agreed that this dynamic was likely at work in southern Thailand as well, where people are struggling with their identity and what it means to be Thai. This is difficult for both the ethnic Malay and ethnic Thai. For years Buddhist Thai have called their ethnic Malay countrymen by a pejorative term that means outsider or guest.

¶5. (C) When asked about the recent closing of schools in the

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three southern provinces of Narathiwat, Yala and Pattani, Ari explained that the vast majority had reopened on December 7. The teachers in the South are very good, according to Ari. Local teachers know the area and the local people. That said, their work in the South is difficult and the government needs to focus on supporting them more effectively. Private Islamic schools often teach local children nothing but religious subjects that leave them unprepared to enter the workforce. Ari said that he has personally talked to Ministry of Education officials on the need for a new education policy. The Ambassador explained that many local Islamic schools in Indonesia are quite good, teaching both religious subjects (under the supervision of the central government) and traditional secular areas of education. Ari replied that government leaders are starting to understand this point and moving to offer more vocational training and support to local students who wish to study at the university level. Ari hopes that the government can also support more local students to go to college and return to the area as teachers. The Ambassador asked if the government had considered this "go local" approach to police recruitment as well. According to Ari, the academy for police officers (as opposed to noncommissioned, lower ranking personnel) is relatively small, and many applicants from the South don't have the educational background to meet the entrance requirements. That said, locally-recruited police know the area and the language. Just as important, local people trust them.

POLICE REFORM

¶6. (C) The Ambassador asked Ari about PM Surayud's efforts to reform the police (Note: septel will report in further detail on this subject. End Note.) Ari explained that Surayud is considering this issue in the hopes of improving the justice system. In the United States and the Philippines, local police are drawn from and are responsible to the surrounding community. In Thailand, the police remain a centralized entity, like the Army--a holdover from an earlier era of more centralized monarchic and militarized rule. In order to make

the police more responsive to local officials and citizens, the government is considering decentralizing the police and placing them under the control of the provincial governor (Note: Bangkok is the sole province with an elected governor; the other 75 have Ministry of Interior careerists appointed in these positions. End Note.) According to Ari, the current system has to change, and while the Surayud government has a limited time in office, it has to seize this opportunity. The Ambassador pointed out that, bluntly put, the Army and the police have traditionally been rivals and some police officials may feel that the military is taking advantage of the coup to weaken their competitors. Ari agreed that many police officials may view it this way. Such a reform effort will be a hard sell, but it will be accomplished peacefully. According to Ari, if left undone, the current structure will lead to a continued lack of justice in future, elected governments. The police "misuse their authority...Thaksin was a policeman."

EDUCATING THE VOTERS

¶7. (C) The Ambassador asked Ari about recent press reports that MOI will work to educate voters on how to select their representatives. Ari explained that this program, starting nationwide in January, will help improve the political sophistication of voters in the countryside. Elections are important to democracy, and citizens need to know how to judge candidates. The Ambassador admitted that, in a previous tour in Thailand, he had asked local people about an upcoming election, to which they replied that someone would come pay them and tell them who to vote for. At that time, interest and access to information about politics were very low. Most people didn't really think about politics. Continuing with this point, the Ambassador noted that the Thaksin government had made use of the expanded media outlets throughout the country, and regularly touted the government's latest programs and policies to the people. Why hasn't the Surayud government conducted a similarly aggressive campaign to win broader public support? Ari said that he had advised just such an approach. While the government wants to promote the corruption cases that it is pursuing against Thaksin and

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his allies (one of the stated reasons for the coup), these are very complicated issues and the investigations are underway. Moreover, those populist policies that Thaksin touted were abused and often benefited the former PM and his cronies. "We need to tell the people this."

REFUGEES

¶8. (SBU) The Ambassador thanked Minister Ari for RTG cooperation in the opening of a new resettlement program for Burmese refugees at the Mae La camp. The United States hopes to move several thousand eligible candidates to the United States in the next year. Ari replied that MOI has had no problems with this issue and that cooperation with the Thai NSC has likewise been excellent.

Biographic Information

¶9. (U) Ari Wong-Araya was born in 1935 in Bangkok. He received a bachelors degree in political science from Chulalongkorn University in 1959, and received graduate degrees from the University of the Philippines, University of Missouri and National Defense College. Ari began his career in the Interior Ministry as a police constable in 1960 before moving to the Department of Community Development (within MOI) in 1969. In 1979, he was appointed governor of Saraburi province, followed by terms as governor of Prachinburi and later Suphanburi. Ari was appointed Deputy Interior Permanent Secretary twice, in 1988 and 1991. He was Director General of the Land Department in MOI in 1990 and became

Permanent Secretary of the Ministry in 1993 before retiring in 1996. In October 2004, Ari joined the Thaksin government as Deputy Education Minister, but resigned several months later to serve as President of the Islamic Bank of Thailand. Ari, a Muslim, is a board member of the Central Islamic Committee of Thailand. Ari is married to Ms. Sumana; they have one son and one daughter. His son Ekkaphot was elected as a Thai Rak Thai member of parliament in 2005, representing Bangkok. Ari speaks limited English.

BOYCE